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SUBJECT: BARONESS CATHERINE ASHTON UNEXPECTED CHOICE FOR EU
HIGH REPRESENTATIVE - BIOGRAPHY AND BACKGROUND

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11. (U) This is an Embassy London and U.S. Mission to the European Union joint cable.

12. (SBU) Summary. Baroness Catherine Margaret Ashton was nominated as the first EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on November 19. She is a British Labour politician who is also currently serving as the European Trade Commissioner. Formerly, she served as Leader of the House of Lords. Ashton was the consensus choice of European Socialist and Social Democrat leaders, and was eventually put forth by British Prime Minister Brown as a candidate for the High Representative after he realized that the UK's candidate for EU President, Tony Blair, had garnered minimal support. Brown also decided to put Ashton forward for High Representative, and not press for a UK candidate for an economic slot, once the French and Germans indicated they would accept a UK "Foreign Minister." Ashton expressed surprise herself at her nomination. Even as late as early evening on November 19, staff at the UK's Foreign Ministry would not have predicted her selection. End Summary.
European Trade Commissioner

13. (SBU) On October 3, 2008, Baroness Ashton of Upholland was nominated to replace Peter Mandelson as the UK's European Commissioner in Brussels; like Mandelson, she was given the trade portfolio. Her appointment by the PM surprised many in Whitehall and in Brussels since the former UK Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon had long been touted as the next UK Commissioner. However, electoral politics derailed Hoon's chances since he held his Labour seat by a very small margin. Hoon would have had to resign as MP to take over as EU Commissioner, which could have cost Labour a seat in a by-election. As a member of the House of Lords, Ashton was seen as a "safe" choice in terms of internal UK Labour politics. While leader of the House of Lords and Lord President of the Council, Baroness Ashton did not have much of a public profile, but did steer the Lisbon Treaty through the House of Lords in June 2008 and had EU and trade policy responsibilities.

14. (U) Because EU Commissioners must not engage in any other occupation during their term of office, Ashton took a leave of absence from the House of Lords on October 14, 2008, retaining her peerage but not her position. Her appointment as Trade Commissioner was scrutinized by the European Parliament and criticized by Daniel Hannan, a British Conservative MEP, on the basis that she "has no background in trade issues at a time when the EU is engaged in critical negotiations with Canada, Korea and the WTO." Ashton was

approved by the European Parliament on 22 October 2008 and subsequently confirmed by the European Council.

15. (SBU) Despite some initial concerns about her lack of experience with trade, she has proven to be an effective Commissioner, leading difficult negotiations with China and Russia, among others, and successfully closing a relatively contentious Free Trade Agreement with South Korea. In contrast to her predecessor, Ashton has avoided placing blame on the U.S. for lack of progress in such negotiations as the Doha Development Agenda, and has often reminded her staff and members of services that such finger-pointing is counterproductive.

Relations with the United States

16. (SBU) Ashton has had numerous contacts with the United States, and in particular with USTR, since becoming Commissioner; she has gone out of her way to find occasions to meet U.S. officials, both in Washington, Brussels and on the margins of other multilateral meetings. In May, USTR Ron Kirk and Baroness Ashton were able to resolve a long-standing U.S.- EU dispute over beef hormones. Notable visits to Washington include meetings in July for bilateral discussions with USTR and others to identify and discuss trade disagreements that might be diffused, participation in the October Transatlantic Economic Council meetings, and participation as part of the EU delegation to the U.S.-EU Summit in Washington on November 3-4. She was also the only EU Commissioner (out of 27) to attend the reception hosted by USEU the morning after President Obama was elected.

Foreign Policy Knowledge

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17. (SBU) At the Labour Party Conference in September 2009, Ashton met with foreign attendees to discuss the importance of the Doha trade round to global economic development. She also expressed concern about rising food prices, lack of investment in agricultural production, and climate change. Those who know her personally note an enduring interest in African assistance and development issues. While Ashton is now well-versed on trade issues, she will have to work to acquaint herself better with defense, security and energy issues. UK Foreign Ministry officials told us that they are already engaged in pulling together briefing material to help Ashton get up to speed quickly, including on Iran issues.

Personal Style

18. (SBU) Ashton, who likes to be called "Cathy" by her interlocutors and staff, has an informal manner and has good working relationships with her counterparts, particularly in the United States. She appears to place a heavy value on building personal relationships to create a foundation for addressing mutual problems. For instance, at her insistence, her first interaction with the U.S. Ambassador to the EU was an informal, one-on-one after-hours drink. Her first interaction with her U.S. counterpart, USTR Ron Kirk, was a dinner several hours after his confirmation; she had traveled to DC during the anticipated week of confirmation, eager to have an early opportunity to get acquainted. It was USTR Kirk's first official meeting. Those around her emphasize Ashton's focus on solving problems and striving to anticipate and defuse disagreements before they materialize.

U.K. Reaction

19. (SBU) The Labour party strongly endorsed Baroness Ashton's appointment. Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague, while congratulating her on the appointment, cautioned: "Now that

Britain will no longer have an EU Commissioner with a major economic brief, it will be vital that the British Government, whichever party is in power, engages closely with the EU Commission to ensure that it keeps a pro-growth agenda." Other Conservative voices have questioned Ashton's qualifications for the job, though their criticism was more about the selection process, noting that the job was "filled without the slightest input from voters, nor even national parliaments" and opined that the UK will now have less influence in a new Commission where the restructuring of financial markets in Europe will be a top priority. The overall UK media reaction to the appointment of both Van Rumpuy and Ashton has mirrored the reaction elsewhere: these are not prominent figures who can now serve as the unique number Washington can call to hear a European policy voice.

Biography

¶10. (U) Ashton was made a life peer as Baroness Ashton of Upholland in 1999. In June, 2001 she was made a Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Department for Education and Skills. In September 2004, she was made a Parliamentary Under-Secretary in the Department for Constitutional Affairs. Ashton became Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the new Ministry of Justice in May 2007. In 2006 she won the "Politician of the Year" award at the annual Stonewall Awards. On June 28, 2007, the new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, appointed her to the Cabinet as Leader of the House of Lords and Lord President of the Council.

¶11. (U) Prior to her work in government, Ashton chaired the Health Authority in Hertfordshire from 1998 to 2001, and her children's school governing body, and became a Vice President of the National Council for One Parent Families. She briefly advised the producers of several U.S. television shows, most notably Boston Legal, on sensitive story lines. Beginning her professional career in 1977, Ashton held positions with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Social Work Training Council.

¶12. (U) Born on March 20, 1956, Ashton studied economics at the University of London and received a degree in Sociology in 1977. She lives in St Albans with her husband, Peter

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Kellner and their children.

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